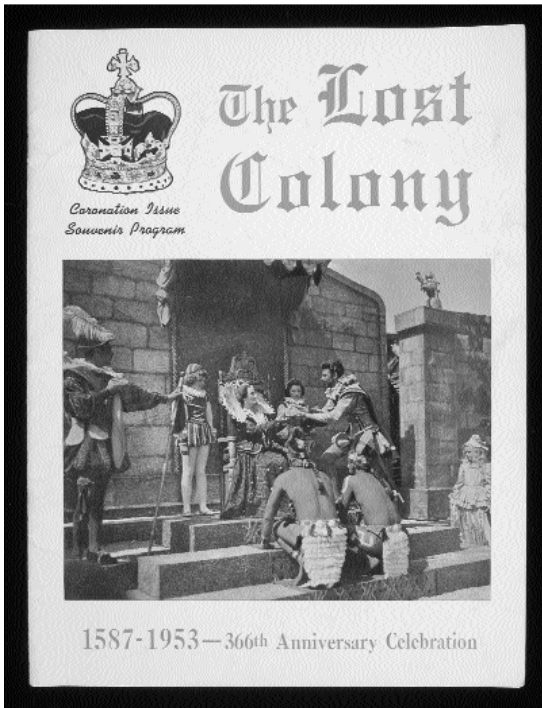


What is a Symphonic Drama?

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 47:1 (fall 2007). Images may differ from those in the original article.



The Lost Colony has many famous alumni, including actor Andy Griffith. He appears on the cover of the 1953 season's program as Sir Walter Raleigh. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

The symphonic drama is a kind of historical play, usually set on the very site depicted in the action. It includes music, dance, pantomime, and poetic dialogue.

Historical pageantry in Europe dates to the Middle Ages; the religious pageant at Oberammergau, Germany, is probably the best known. Many big, spectacular stage events became popular in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Pageants were not exactly plays, but they showed a series of scenes in which historical events followed one another.

The pageants leading up to the 1937 production of *The Lost Colony* were influenced by the event at Oberammergau. People in eastern North Carolina had grown frustrated with the lack of awareness about the Lost Colony. The residents of Roanoke Island thought that staging a pageant themselves would share the story with the world.

Lost Colony author Paul Green had a lifelong fascination with theatrical elements, such as dance, language, music, and lighting, and a desire for drama to make a difference in American social life. Under the tutelage of Frederick Koch, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Green was deeply influenced by his ideas about “folk drama” and a concern for ordinary people and their experiences. In addition to receiving the 1927 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his Broadway play *In Abraham's Bosom*—remarkable for the time in its serious depiction of the plight of African Americans in the South—Green created and spread this new dramatic form.

The American symphonic drama was born.